

# Abbey

## *Desert Solitaire*

### The Why and the Wherefore

*Why read, discuss, and write about Ed Abbey's Desert Solitaire?*

First, like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, it is one of those rare books that combines science, literary merit, and argumentation. In Abbey's case, it is the science of the naturalist that combines with the artistry of the writer to make a compelling argument. Like Carson's *Silent Spring*, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* mounts a critique of modern industrial practices, developed with detailed analysis and heightened with effective writing, to advance its polemic (or argument) against the environment-degrading excesses of industrialization. Like Carson, Abbey offers alternative practices as a solution to the problem.

However, it is as an effective model of persuasion, that *Desert Solitaire*, like *Silent Spring*, most readily justifies its place in the English curriculum. In an era when environmental problems are starting to rival, if not supplant, global terrorism as the most immediate crisis facing the world, books like *Desert Solitaire* and *Silent Spring* become even more relevant. Finally, *Desert Solitaire's* place in our curriculum is warranted by its enormous influence on the modern environmental movement, and the renewed activism and debate it has sparked. Writer Larry McMurtry, for example, refers to Ed Abbey as the "Thoreau of the American West," while *Desert Solitaire* has been called "one of the finest nature narratives in American literature, and has been compared to Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* and Thoreau's *Walden*."

By virtue of its science, its literary merits, and its argumentative strategies, by virtue of the interest it arouses, the debates it awakens, and the engagement it fosters, *Desert Solitaire* is an effective vehicle not only for developing the arts of inquiry and persuasion, but for a more actively engaged, participatory citizenship. The problems of the world are real and immediate; they require real and immediate engagement—in the classroom, as in the community. The quality of Abbey's engagement with this very real problem (the impact of industrialization on the most pristine realms of the environment) might serve as a compelling model for our own engagement with this and other problems that affect our environment—and the world at large.